The first TechLaunch business pitch contest was held in 2004. More than 50 companies have participated in the event, which awards prize money for the area where a lot of companies struggle.

Where are they now? Catching up with eight TechLaunch-winning entrepreneurs

By Kortny Rolston, *INL Communications & Governmental Affairs*

In the world of business, having a great product or idea is one thing. Getting it to market and in the hands of consumers is another.

It can take millions of dollars and years of work for that to happen. Those who specialize in licensing technologies or have launched startups often refer to it as "the valley of death."

At TechLaunch 9.0, TechConnect chair Melanie Rubocki presented Tazer Tag creator Brian Starnes with the Crowd Pitch award.

"It's a critical time," said Stephanie Cook, a technology-based economic development specialist at Idaho National Laboratory. "There are a lot of issues an inventor or principal need to work through – financing, licensing, market development. Very few new companies actually make it through that time."

That is why INL and others helped establish Idaho TechConnect and TechLaunch. TechConnect is a statewide organization that aids innovators in bringing their ideas to market. TechLaunch is an "annual business pitch contest designed to educate and provide a stage for entrepreneurs and students to practice and hone their pitch in front of the business/investment community."

The first TechLaunch competition was held in 2004. More than 50 companies have participated in the event, which awards prize money to companies ($10,000 to $11,000 for the first-place winner) and university student teams. Rick Ritter, president of Idaho TechConnect, said TechLaunch focuses on the business pitch because that's where a lot of companies struggle.

"They have a great idea, but they don't have a business plan or a clear strategy they can present to investors," he said.

During 2012's TechLaunch 9.0, Rubocki presented the $5,000 Next Gen award to a University of Idaho team.

Those who've won in the annual competition say while the money is helpful, the real benefit is practicing their pitches and meeting potential investors.

"It was a great experience for us," said Kyle Kinghorn, president of Citius Composites, a Rexburg-based company and the 2012 TechLaunch winner. "We got some great feedback on our pitch. It's given me more confidence to go in front of investors when that time comes."

Many of the winners are now well-known, profitable companies while others have been sold. Here is a look at where the nine TechLaunch winners are now.

ECO Research (TechLaunch 1.0, 2004)
The Nampa, Idaho-based company developed a new home irrigation technology equipped with a sensor- based algorithm that determined when a lawn needed to be watered.

Now: The technology has since been sold to Baseline Systems in Boise, Idaho, and is being used in the company's residential line of sprinkler irrigation.

Bully Dog Technologies (TechLaunch 2.0, 2005)
The American Falls, Idaho-based company developed software that is downloaded into a vehicle's computer system and helps engines operate more efficiently.

Then: Bully Dog primarily sold its after-market product to owners of light-duty diesel pickups.

Now: The company has since expanded into heavy-duty diesel trucks such as semitrailers and the

gas diesel market. It also sponsored TechLaunch 9.0 held in May.

"The TechLaunch contest forced us to take everything we had in our head and write it down in a business plan," said Daryl Klassen, a Bully Dog owner. "We had never done that before. That plan gave us something to follow and really became our roadmap for the future."

Optimal Solutions (TechLaunch 3.0, 2006)
The Idaho Falls, Idaho-based company has developed software that allows engineers, architects and others to easily change the shape of an item and optimize performance.

Then: The company's primary customers were aerospace and automotive companies in the United States.

Now: Optimal Solutions has expanded its network of overseas distributors and its software is now sold in Japan, Europe and China. In addition to the aerospace and automotive industries, biomedical companies and mechanical engineering programs are now using its software.

"Tech Launch forced us to write a business plan and refine our business pitch," said Mark Landon, an engineer who founded Optimal Solutions. "Not long after we won Tech Launch, we found a local angel investor to invest in the company."

IVUS Energy Innovations (TechLaunch 4.0, 2007)
The Moscow, Idaho-based company has developed a heavy duty flashlight that recharges in 90 seconds and can last up to 10 years.

Then: When IVUS Energy Innovations entered the TechLaunch competition, the company was refining its prototype and had yet to make or sell a flashlight.

Now: Owners signed a contract with a sales and licensing company and now produce two different products. It has sold more than 150,000 units worldwide.

"TechLaunch gave us an opportunity to present our product in front of real investors," said David Alexander, the company's chief technology officer. "When they showed interest in what we were doing, it validated that we were on the right track. The money was great, but it was the connections we made and momentum we gained that has benefited us."

Caring Technologies (TechLaunch 5.0, 2008)
The Boise, Idaho-based company has developed a remote monitoring system, which doctors and health-care officials can use to treat autistic and special-needs children.

Then: Caring Technologies was just preparing to launch its remote monitoring system in the marketplace when Ron Oberleitner, the company's chief executive officer, entered TechLaunch. At the time, the company planned to market its product to the health care and education industries.

Now: Renamed "Behavior Imaging Technologies," the company has landed several contracts with the U.S. military, and state and federal agencies. The Idaho Department of Education uses the technology to monitor the progress of special-needs children in the state.

"Winning TechLaunch confirmed that we had a viable technology and that we were on the right track," Oberleitner said. "It gave us credibility with different agencies, which helped us get some new contracts."

Adrenity (TechLaunch 6.0, 2009)
The Meridian, Idaho-based company developed a technology (designed to replace Muzak) that provides merchants with a specialized radio channel that can be used to advertise products and services.

Then: Initially, the company's primary market was convenience stores and truck stops.

Now: Adrenity is still in operation but has been unable to raise sufficient funding to meet demand for the services.

The Melni Innovation Group, LLC (TechLaunch 7.0 2010)
The Twin Falls, Idaho-based company developed a device that connects electrical wires and is faster to install than traditional wire crimping. (The design is based on the Chinese finger trap.)

Then: Melni Innovation had secured a patent for its new connector and built a few prototypes. The device, however, was untested when inventor Mark Melni presented at TechLaunch.

Now: Melni has since been issued three more patents and has submitted the connector for certification by an industry group. During tests run at INL, the Melni connector withstood 41,000 volts of electricity before breaking down.

"We wouldn't be where we are today without TechLaunch," Melni said. "I would only be a fraction of the way down this road."

Appible (TechLaunch 8.0, 2011)
The Rexburg, Idaho-based company works with universities, automobile manufacturers, artists and others to create "wallpaper" applications for

mobile phones.

Then: When Appible officials entered the TechLaunch competition, the company had secured three or four licenses.

Now: Appible has close to 200 licenses and has created thousands of mobile applications for Androids, iPhones and BlackBerrys. It used its TechLaunch money to purchase licenses.

"TechLaunch was a great experience for us," said Matt Nicolaysen, Appible's president. "It boosted our credibility with the brands we were trying to license and helped us refine our business pitch for investors."

Citius Composites (TechLaunch 9.0 2012)
The Rexburg, Idaho-based company manufactures after-market sporting goods and medical equipment and other products from advanced materials like carbon fiber.

With its $11,000 seed money from TechLaunch 9.0, Citius purchased some equipment so workers can machine parts for a new carbon fiber prosthesis the company is developing.

"Instead of waiting for a machine shop to send us parts, we can do it ourselves," said Kyle Kinghorn, Citius president. "(The money) is advancing our project."

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